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ABSTRACT

Subjects from three generations of Chinese-Canadian families completed questionnaires to assess their concept of family. A total of 12 males and 12 females from the three age groups participated. Age groups were composed of 9- through 13-year-olds, 30- through 50-year-olds, and 65-year-olds and older. Tasks included listing family members, drawing a diagram of the participant's own family, making a typical family from a set of figures, responding to a check-list definition of family, and providing demographic information. Compared to family concepts of children and adults, the elderly adults' concepts appeared to be relatively closer to the traditional Chinese emphasis on an extended family system. For example, elders included more extended members in their own family and in their representations of a typical family. Elders also included more male children in their typical family. (RH)

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CONCEPT OF FAMILY IN THREE GENERATIONS OF CHINESE-CANADIANS

Dominica So and Barbara Hodkin

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Abstract

People of different ethnic backgrounds may perceive family boundaries and relationships differently, and information about this may provide further understanding of Canadian multiculturalism. Three generations of Chinese-Canadians completed questionnaires to assess concept of family. There were 12 males and 12 females in each age group (9-13 years, 30-50, 65 and older). The tasks included listing family members, drawing a diagram of their own family, making a typical family from a set of figures, responding to a check-list definition of family, and demographic information.

In listing members of their own family, half of the subjects included relatives outside the nuclear family. Significantly more elders than adults or children named extended family members. There were no significant differences in the types of family diagrams drawn.

In choosing figures to make a typical family, 58% included extended family members. Again, more elders did so than adults or children. In addition, the elderly included more people, more children, and more male children than the other two age groups. In representing the typical family, pets were chosen by more children than adults or elders.

In reponding to the check-list definition of family, emotional relationships and processes (for example, "love and care") and practical responsibilities (for example,

"raising children") were ranked very high in importance by the three groups of subjects. Lowest ratings were given to "including friends in the family", the "single-parent family", "childless families", and "fighting and argument".

Compared to the children and adults, the elderly's concept of family appears relatively closer to the traditional Chinese emphasis on extended family system; for example, elders included more extended members both in their own and in the typical family. Also, elders showed more male children in their typical family.

These results are considered in terms of ethnicity, acculturalization, and developmental effects.

Introduction

There has been no previous research examining the concept of family between generations and among different ethnic groups. The objective of this study is to explore concept of family in three generations of male and female Chinese-Canadians. It may provide further insight into the multicultural society of Canada.

It is commonly believed that the structure of the Chinese family is the traditional "extended family type", and that family is seen as a "continuum of descent". In the Chinese family, sex, generation, and age are important personal variables, with a high value given to males, earlier generations, and older people, with regard to respect, obedience, and filial piety. The Chinese kinship system heavily stresses the importance of the male.

We hypothesized that people of different age levels would differ on their perception of family, ideas about the structure of family, the definition of family, and what constitutes a typical family. Because the elders have lived in Canadian society for a smaller proportion of their lives than the other two groups, there may be acculturalization effects as well.

Method

Subjects

There were 12 males and 12 females in each of three age groups (children, adults and elderly). One group consisted of Chinese-Canadian school children (age 9-13), the second group of the children's parents or adults from other families (age 30-50), and the remaining group of the children's grandparents or members of the Chinese elderly club (age 65 or above).

Materials and Procedure

The questionnaire contained seven research tasks and a set of demographic questions. The four tasks presented here were adapted from Hodkin (1983) and Gilby and Pederson (1982). The first was a question asking "Who is in your family?" In this, the subjects were asked to list the members of their own families and to put down the relationship of each person to them. This was followed by a request to draw a diagram of their families by making a circle for each person, with their name, and drawing lines between the circles to show relationships. To examine family prototypes, subjects were shown a set of line drawings of twenty people and four animals. There was a male and a female at 10 different age levels, ranging from babies to old people. The subjects were asked to choose some of these figures to make a typical family.

On the checklist definition task, there were thirty-five items related to such things as the members of the

family, relationship among members, emotional experience, functions of the family, and members' responsibilities. Participants were asked to rate each item on importance to their definition of family on a response scale from 0 (not important) to 3 (somewhat important) to 6 (extremely important).

Results

In listing members of their families, 48% of the subjects listed only the members of their nuclear family, and 49% included extended family members. Significantly more children (14) and adults (17) listed only nuclear family members than elderly (4), $X^2(2) = 7.94, p < .02$. In contrast, more elderly (20) named extended family members than adults (6) or children (9), $X^2(2) = 9.31, p < .01$. Only one child and one adult listed pets in their families (See Figure 1)

Family diagrams were analysed according to type of configuration. The categories of analysis included hierarchical, cluster, combination of hierarchical and cluster, spoke, and string-of-beads types. The most common configuration for the elderly was the hierarchical type (10), for children the string-of-beads (7) and cluster (6) types, and for adults the hierarchical (6) and string-of-beads (7) types. The differences between age groups in type of configuration were not significant (See Figures 2 and 3)

In making a typical family, 25% of the subjects included nuclear members only and adults (12) made this choice significantly more than children (4) and elderly (2), $X^2(2) = 9.33$, $p < .01$. The majority (58%) of the subjects included extended family members, and the elderly (22) did so significantly more than the adults (11) and children (9), $X^2(2) = 7.00$, $p < .05$. Moreover, the elders included more people $F(2,69) = 9.60$, $p < .0002$, more children $F(2,69) = 3.62$, $p < .04$, and more male children $F(2,69) = 6.15$, $p < .004$ than the other two age groups. Furthermore, pets were chosen by more children (17) than adults (5) and elderly (3), $X^2(2) = 13.76$, $p < .01$ (See Figures 4 and 5)

On the checklist task, each of the items were rated on importance to definition of family. The four items with highest mean ratings were "love and care", "raising children", "providing education", and "understanding each other". These four items refer to emotional relationships or processes, and to practical responsibilities. All of them were ranked above 5.5 on a six-point response scale. All three groups of subjects considered these very important to definition of family. Somewhat lower ratings were given to certain items commonly considered to define family; "nuclear family", "blood or legal relationship", "living together", and "extended family". The lowest ratings were for "including friends in the family" followed by "single-parent family", "childless family", and "fighting and argument" (See Table 1 and Figure 6)

Discussion

The majority of the Chinese-Canadian adults included only nuclear family members in their own family, and in the typical family they constructed. Based on these data, it appears that the core concept of family for the adults consists of a mother, father and their children. Similarly, most of the children named only nuclear members of their own families. However, in their typical families, the children often included pets in addition to nuclear members. Pets are clearly appreciated by children and may serve positive functions as family members.

Extended family is a central part of family concept for the elderly. This is shown both in the listing of their own family and in their typical families. This may reflect both the generational status of the elderly and the fact that they have been exposed to Canadian culture less than the middle-aged adults and the children. Grandparents in any ethnic group have completed their own child-rearing and are enjoying their grandchildren; they are likely to include more than two generations in the family. The elderly in this research are, plausibly, close in their concept to the traditional Chinese idea of family, which is patriarchal with descent traced through the male line. This influence is demonstrated in the typical families: the elderly included more male children. The reasons given by the elderly for wanting more male children were to carry

on the family name, to take care of them, or to be companions to the fathers.

In rating the importance of various items to personal definition of family, all three age groups indicated that love-and-caring was the most important item. Nuclear family, blood or legal relationships, living together, and extended family were about in the middle in relative importance. In other words, these items, referring to things commonly held to define family, were considered at least somewhat important to the participants, but love-and-caring was the most central attribute to their definition of family. It could be that a strong, positive, emotional commitment is seen as the critical basis for people with legal and biological bonds living together in nuclear and extended families.

In sum, concept of family changes and develops across the life-span as individuals experience different stages of life, at different cognitive levels. It appears that the elderly's concept of family is more similar to the Chinese traditional extended family type than that of the children and adults. Finally, for all three age groups the most important attribute in defining family is "love and caring".

WHO IS IN YOUR FAMILY?
CHILDREN
ADULTS
ELDERLY
NUMBER OF SUBJECTS
24
18
12
6
0
NUCLEAR ONLY
PETS INCLUDED
EXTENDED INCLUDED

FIGURE 1

TYPE OF FAMILY DIAGRAM

THREE MOST COMMOM TYPES

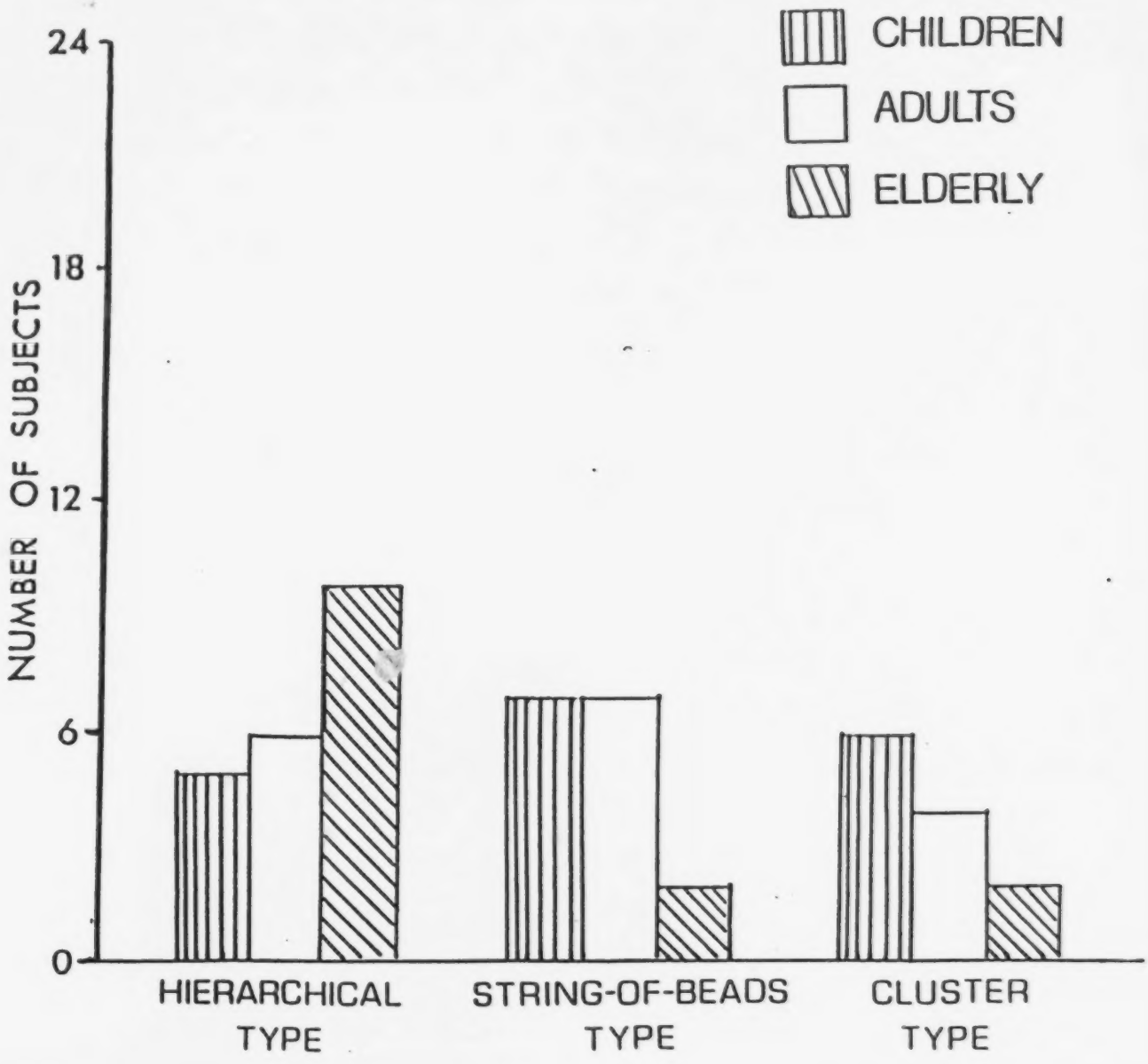
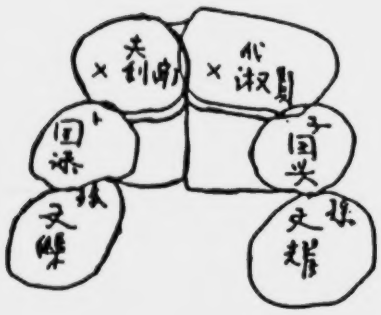


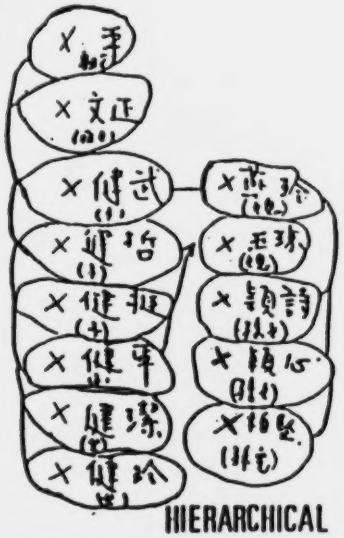
FIGURE 2

EXAMPLES OF FAMILY DIAGRAM

ELDERLY

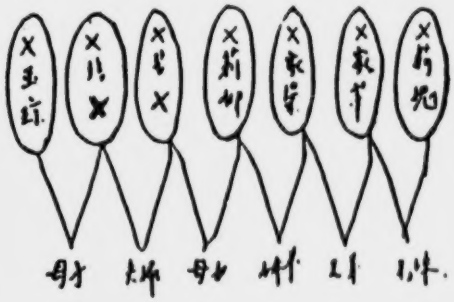


HIERARCHICAL TYPE

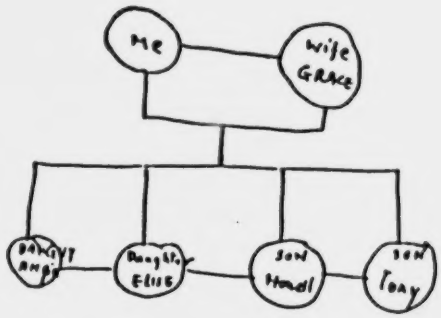


HIERARCHICAL TYPE

ADULTS

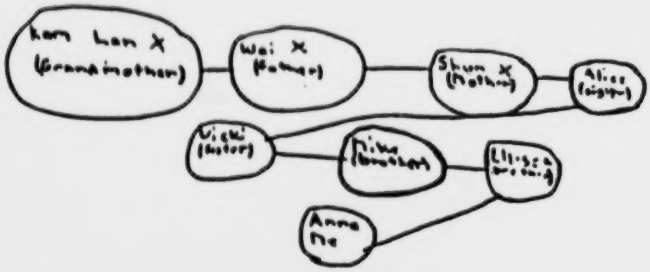


STRING-OF-BEADS TYPE

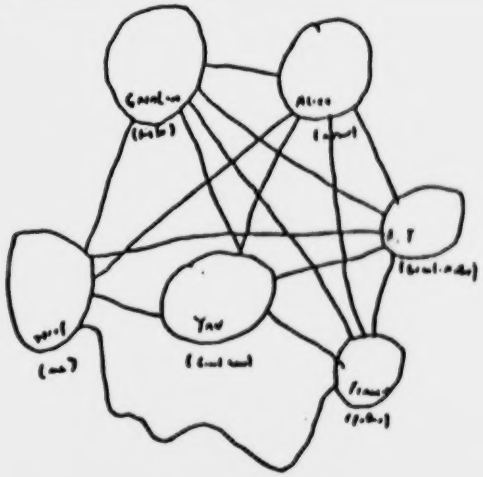


HIERARCHICAL TYPE

CHILDREN



STRING-OF-BEADS TYPE



CLUSTER TYPE

FIGURE 3

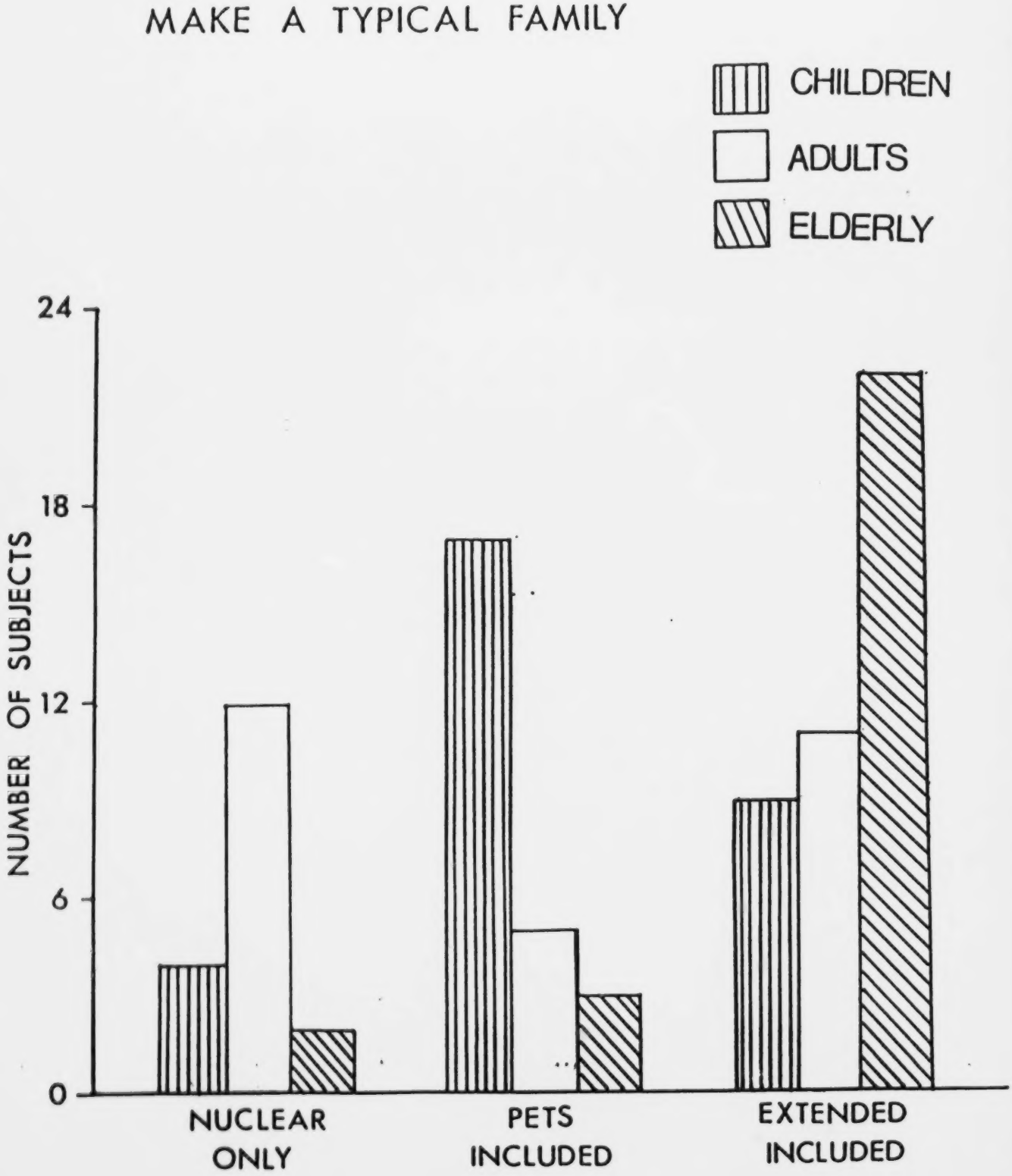

MAKE A TYPICAL FAMILY
CHILDREN
ADULTS
ELDERLY
NUMBER OF SUBJECTS
24
18
12
6
0
NUCLEAR ONLY
PETS INCLUDED
EXTENDED INCLUDED

FIGURE 4

AN EXAMPLE OF ELDERS' TYPICAL FAMILY

FIGURE 5

Table 1

CHECKLIST DEFINITION OF FAMILY

Items Valued on Importance:	M	SD
Highest ratings:		
love and caring	5.65	0.84
raising children	5.57	0.80
providing education	5.51	1.06
understanding each other	5.49	1.00
Some ratings in mid-range:		
nuclear family	4.65	1.50
legal relationship	4.38	1.57
blood relationship	4.25	1.78
living together	4.19	1.45
extended family	3.39	1.96
Lowest ratings:		
including friends in family	2.33	2.11
the single-parent family	1.90	1.83
childless families	1.44	1.23
fighting and arguments	1.40	1.56

Note: 0 = not important 3 = somewhat important

6 = extremely important

A PICTURE

DRAWN BY A GIRL OF HER FAMILY

FIGURE 6